



A Case Study in Additional and Special Memory Access Tools: Working With My Own 18 Month-Old Separation Trauma

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I was separated from my parents for three to four weeks when I was eighteen months old, and the story of the effects of this trauma and my work to resolve it provides good examples of many of the phenomena associated with pre-autobiographical traumatic memories. This case study also presents theoretical information and additional/special memory access tools that are particularly helpful for working with this kind of pre-autobiographical trauma. (Note that this case study was written July 2004, so it tells the story from the perspective of twenty-plus years ago.)

I. Longstanding triggered reactions, initial difficult healing work:

- For as long as I can remember, I would get triggered in any situation where I felt like I needed help, I asked for the Lord to come and help me, but then didn't perceive any response. One of the most intense triggers was "stuck" ministry/therapy sessions. I would get especially triggered if I had worked long and hard and was out of ideas, the person was really miserable and having difficulty functioning, and we were running out of time.

I found a number of different traumatic memories that were contributing to my stuck-session triggers, and I experienced significant improvement as these memories were resolved, but there was an especially miserable core that didn't move. I could always feel it when I was in one of these stuck-session scenarios, but it was extremely difficult to focus or articulate what this particularly miserable trigger tangle was about. I wasn't really able to even get words for what felt true in this place until after several additional pieces came together (as described below). Now¹ I would describe the triggered thoughts as "He won't come/He doesn't want to come," and "He won't help/He doesn't want to help" referring to God. And along with these triggered thoughts I would experience a miserable morass of loneliness, rejection, and discouragement. Another part of the triggered thoughts and emotions was a deep confusion about *why* the Lord wouldn't come/didn't want to come.

- For as long as I can remember, I have also experienced a persistent, pervasive insecurity and anxiety in relationships. The anxiety and insecurity would be especially intense in any situation where somebody was actually unhappy with me, but even in the safest and most stable relationships – with my wife, family, and closest friends – I couldn't get rid of this persistent, sneaky insecurity. No matter what I did, and in spite of much objective reassurance, I would still feel this insecurity. It was also very difficult to get words for what felt true in this place, but eventually I was able to identify the thoughts as: "There's something wrong with me, and no matter what I do or how hard I try, eventually the people that are important to me will go away/send me away/cut me off/not want to be with me."

When working on many other issues/triggers, I have gotten lots of benefit with the usual emotional healing process – focus on the initial targets, ask the Lord to guide the process and

¹ Again, for this case-study "now" is July 2024.

help me find the traumatic memory roots, report whatever comes forward, follow the clues that come forward, work with Jesus to resolve any trauma that is identified, and apply trouble-shooting tools as needed. But when I tried to work on these two issues/targets I just went around in circles (for many months). I could not figure out where this stuff was coming from. That is, I could not find the root memories in spite of many hours of work. And the triggered reactions certainly did not resolve.

I now realize that clues were present, but when I first started working on these two issues I didn't recognize or understand the thoughts, emotions, images, and other pre-autobiographical memory fragments that had been coming forward.

II. Helpful new information, additional memory access tools: Eventually I learned helpful new information about memory phenomena, and I also stumbled onto several additional memory access tools that helped the process move forward.

A. Resonance triggering from movies/books and collateral information from my family: I began noticing consistent resonance triggering with movies or books where there was a child who's mother was sick or where there was a child who lost their parents. I noticed especially that I would experience intense emotions every time I watched the scene in *The Kid* where the audience learns that Rusty's mother is sick, and then when Rusty learns she is dying. Initially I was puzzled by my intense emotional reaction because my mother had never been seriously ill and I had never lost a parent. However, as I realized how consistent, persistent, and intense this triggering was, I decided to pursue it further. I described my observations to my older brother, who commented that maybe this was connected to the time when Mom had Mono during her pregnancy with my younger sister. When I asked Mom and Dad about this, they reported that Mom had been so ill that Dad had to carry her across the hallway to the bathroom, *and* so sick that my brother and I had been sent to stay with friends in another city for three weeks because Mom was too ill to care for us. I had no conscious memory of any of this.

To put this in perspective: An eighteen-month-old will experience a three week separation from his parents in much the same way as he will experience his parents dying suddenly – they disappear suddenly, and stay away longer than any possible ability to understand or cope with their absence. Furthermore, an eighteen-month-old perceives his parents to be omnipotent – he believes nothing happens unless they allow it, and that nothing could make them do anything they don't want to do. This means he will believe he is separated from his parents because they *want* to be away from him, and that they can hear his calls and could come if they wanted to, but they are *choosing* to ignore his cries for help. By the end of the three weeks of separation I was totally confused about what had happened, hopeless that Mom and Dad would ever come back, and also very angry that they had left me, that they were allowing me to suffer so intensely, and that they would not come when I called for them.

Previously, when implicit-memory thoughts and emotions from this eighteen-month-old experience came forward during emotional healing sessions, I would go past these important clues and then eventually shut the process down because it didn't seem like anything was happening – it didn't seem like the session was going anywhere. (The thoughts and emotions that were coming forward didn't make sense, and I wasn't getting any explicit memory material that I recognized as "memories.") Also, when thoughts and emotions had previously come forward in response to *The Kid* movie, I would invalidate and dismiss them: "This is ridiculous – what am I crying for? This never happened to me. I must be just pretending to be like the kid in the movie as a pathetic form of self-pity/feeling sorry for myself."

But after talking to my parents and older brother about my early separation trauma, the information they provided let me know what I was looking for, and also validated the thoughts and emotions that would come forward. This enabled me to give myself permission to stay with

the process when pre-autobiographical memory content was coming forward, and it also helped me recognize and understand this material.

B. Implicit-memory phenomena and Explicit/Implicit-memory time line: Around this same time, I learned more about implicit memory, and especially about the explicit/implicit memory time line. Specifically, I learned that implicit memory is available even before birth, but that explicit memory doesn't come "online" until the hippocampus and frontal lobes myelinate – starting at around 18 months, and increasing steadily for years. This information explained why I couldn't find "normal" memories for the important eighteen-month-old experience, and provided additional help in recognizing and understanding the pre-autobiographical implicit-memory material that I *was* seeing/experiencing. As with the historical information from my family, this understanding and validation helped me stay with the implicit-memory thoughts and emotions that were coming forward instead of dismissing them.

This additional information and these additional memory access tools resulted in some progress and some benefits, but not complete resolution:

Shortly after talking to my brother and parents about Mom's illness and our time away, I had a session with my usual prayer partner, Dan. As I was talking about *The Kid* movie, my triggers, and my conversations with my family, an image came into my mind of being on the phone. I was very small, standing in a room with the phone cord coming down from somewhere above me – definitely the perspective of a small child. I was talking to my mom, and I realized I had learned that if you could hear somebody's voice it meant that they must be somewhere nearby – just like with hide and seek. In the image/memory, I was looking around the room, trying to figure out where the voice on the phone was coming from. I could see a sofa across the room from me, and thought: "Maybe that's where she is! Even a big person could hide behind the sofa!"

As often happens, I did not perceive the importance of these images and thoughts when they first came into my mind. In fact, I actually told Dad that the process wasn't working and that I wasn't getting anything. But when he reminded me that I needed to describe *whatever* was coming into my awareness, "regardless of whether it makes sense or feels important," I eventually reported the images and thoughts that had been coming into my mind. Within seconds of starting to describe them to Dan, I experienced a sudden wave of intense emotions and started sobbing. And I had a similar experience when I talked to Mom on the phone about my session with Dan – as soon as I started describing the thoughts and images that had come to me, I felt a wave of intense emotions and started crying.²

After connecting with these images, thoughts, and emotions during this session, I was finally able to get words for the thoughts and feelings that would sometimes come when I was stuck in difficult therapy sessions, but that I had never previously been able to articulate. Furthermore, this previous difficulty made sense in light of the eighteen-month-old memory anchoring the triggered thoughts and emotions – the whole experience was pre-explicit memory, pre-verbal, and filled with confusion. Once I slipped into the implicit-memory package from this eighteen-month-old trauma, I had a hard time thinking clearly, I didn't have words for what was happening, and I couldn't figure out where it was coming from because I didn't get (explicit)

² For discussion of why we are often unable to feel the importance or recognize the meaning of mental content when it first comes into our awareness, and of how describing our mental content *out loud to another person* pulls it through our right and left pre-frontal cortices so that we then *are* able to feel it's importance and recognize it's meaning, see chapter sixteen in Karl D. Lehman, *The Immanuel Approach: For Emotional Healing and for Life* (Evanston, IL: Immanuel Publishing, 2016).

“memories.”

Another developmental point is that at eighteen months I had no understanding of realistic limitations for my parents. At eighteen months, we perceive our parents to be omnipotent. My thoughts and feelings in these memories were that my parents could come to me if they wanted to (being omnipotent), but that they were choosing not to. These were *exactly* the thoughts and feelings I would have towards the Lord – He can hear my pleas for help and He could come if He wanted to, but He is choosing to not come for some mysterious reason.

II. More helpful new information, special memory access tools: During this past year (2004), I stumbled onto several “special” memory access tools. I call them special because they are unusually effective and because they require unusual ministry/relationship/community situations.

A. “Crock-pot” Immanuel Approach with spouse and/or close friend: After developing a presentation on transparency, honesty, vulnerability, and humility as spiritual disciplines, Charlotte and I decided to experiment with trying to practice these every day in our relationship with each other. By practicing over time, we learned to be more aware of the thoughts, images, and emotions that came into our minds during any time we were together, and to simply report/describe this material as one would in an Immanuel Approach session – even if it is vulnerable, humbling, painful, or doesn’t make sense yet.³ We have named the result “crock-pot” Immanuel Approach because it looks kind of like an extended Immanuel Approach session on low heat. The result has been similar to watering the ground each day for a couple weeks before plowing. Stuff I had not been able to get to with direct effort in time-limited ministry sessions would soften and come to the surface with this slow-cook/soak-and-soften method, with little pieces of memory, insight, and healing coming forward periodically as Charlotte and I continued to do this over months. This slow-cook/soak-and-soften method also caused difficult healing targets to be much easier to work with when we would have more focused emotional healing sessions.

B. Talking about traumatic memories with people who were part of the original experiences: I stumbled into this one during the spring of 2004 when my older brother visited for a weekend. One evening, among other things, we were talking about my healing journey with this eighteen-month-old separation experience. As Charlotte and I shared about my healing journey regarding these events, he would occasionally repeat what he had been saying since I first spoke with him about Mom being sick: “I can remember lots of details about being at the Wetzel’s, but I can’t remember you being there at all.” At the end of this evening of good fellowship he went to get ready for bed, and then came back five minutes later. He was crying as he said, “It all just came

³ This transparency-honesty-vulnerability-humility “spiritual discipline” has some overlap with, but is not exactly the same as, the technique/discipline that is described in “The ‘Describe Everything’ Technique/Discipline In the Context of Close Personal Relationships.” The “describe everything” technique/discipline discussed in this other essay is much more focused on helping us to catch content *that we might otherwise miss because it is subtle* by learning to describe internal mental content that does not yet feel important or make sense. In contrast, this transparency-honesty-vulnerability-humility technique/discipline is much more focused on helping us to become aware of and look at content that we might otherwise avoid because it is vulnerable and/or uncomfortable. The most powerful approach for pressing into personal healing and growth is to combine these two techniques/disciplines. NOTE: This can be overwhelming/disruptive if the people implementing it do not have a high level of capacity, a relatively low level of triggering that disrupts their ability to function, and strong relational maturity skills. If you decide to try this, please start by *gently* experimenting with these techniques/disciplines, and if you experience them to be overwhelming and/or disruptive then put them on the shelf for a season and continue with all other aspects of an Immanuel Approach lifestyle that will build your capacity, decrease your triggering, and increase your relational maturity skills. As you continue to heal and mature, you can periodically try another round of gently experimenting.

back to me. I can remember you looking up at me and asking, over and over, ‘where’s Mom?’ I kept trying to explain, but you didn’t understand, and just kept asking ‘where’s Mom?’ I tried to help, but I didn’t know what to do.” As he connected with and talked about his memories, I also connected with more thoughts, emotions, and perceptual memory fragments (for example, brief visual images of looking up at him and asking ‘where’s Mom’). Fortunately, we happened to be in the ideal situation, where we could pray for healing as thoughts, images, and emotions came forward. Charlotte and I prayed with my brother, and he got some good healing. Then Charlotte prayed with me, and I got some good healing.

My talking with him about my experience enabled him to access important memories that had been buried for 40+ years, and then him talking about his memories that were coming forward helped me access more of my images, thoughts, and emotions. We have gone back and forth in this way several times now.⁴

C. Talking directly about triggered thoughts and emotions to the person who is the focus of the triggering, in the present: I stumbled into this one during a conversation with Charlotte about my anxiety regarding making her an anniversary card. I was triggered, and I could tell that my emotions would connect much more intensely if I made eye contact and expressed my insecurity directly to her (for example, “I’m afraid you will be disappointed and unhappy with me”), as opposed to looking away from her eyes and talking about my anxiety more indirectly. I decided to choose the path of more vulnerability and intensity, and immediately connected with emotions and tears as I did this. I perceived these same dynamics on several other occasions, and I connected with emotions and tears each time I chose to make eye contact and talk directly to Charlotte about the thoughts and emotions that were being triggered. I received especially valuable moments of healing in the situations where we were able to do Immanuel prayer together as all of this happened.

Trying this with Charlotte and Dan has been especially effective in helping me connect with my relationship anxiety and insecurity. And *information I have recently learned about attachment wounds* helped me to recognize that the thoughts and emotions that were coming forward were implicit memories of attachment trauma from the eighteen-month-old separation experience. As with the information about implicit memory, the new understanding about attachment wounds helped me to understand, validate, and stay with the process, as opposed to dismissing content I didn’t understand and shutting the process down prematurely.

These three “special” memory access tools, and also the new understanding regarding attachment wounds, resulted in new important steps forward.

III. Steadily accumulating positive changes: Observable positive changes have been steadily unfolding as I have continue to work with the wounds and lies associated with this eighteen-month-old separation trauma:

A. Steadily increasing ability to stay with difficult therapy/ministry sessions: As described above, previous to this healing I would slip more and more into the ego state of a miserable, confused, lonely, deeply discouraged eighteen-month-old who couldn’t figure out why his parents wouldn’t come whenever this would get triggered during difficult therapy/ministry

⁴ Additional benefit: After these interactions with my brother would bring deep content up to the surface, it would be easier to access related content. For example, several weeks after the first of these conversations with my brother, more thoughts, emotions, and insights related to my early separation trauma came forward when I talked about my interactions with my brother during a prayer session with Dan.

sessions. I would try to act normal and care for the person receiving ministry as best I could, while internally I would be waiting miserably for the end of the session and the end of the day. Not surprisingly, my ability to navigate through intermediate and advanced issues was dramatically impaired when I was being flooded with the thoughts and emotions of a confused, lonely, discouraged, overwhelmed eighteen-month-old.⁵

Thankfully (as I'm sure the reader would expect), my ability to stay with difficult therapy/ministry sessions, and my ability to troubleshoot through intense, complicated blockages in these difficult sessions, has steadily improved as I have progressively resolved the underlying separation trauma.

B. Impact on relationship with the Lord: For as long as I can remember, I have had a deep expectation of being disappointed by the Lord – a deep expectation that He would not come when I called, and that He would not help me when I really needed Him. And this expectation of disappointment would often be triggered simply by asking for anything I really wanted or needed.

In contrast, my spontaneous emotional response is now much different. First of all, I no longer ask the Lord to be with me. Rather, I thank Him that He is always with me and ask Him to help me perceive His presence more tangibly. And when I ask the Lord for help, or even just for a blessing of some kind, I realize that He may or may not give me what I ask for but I don't have that sense that He doesn't *want* to answer my prayers. That is, I feel a *spontaneous, genuine hopefulness* that He actually might answer my prayers, combined with a realistic awareness that He may not always answer them in the way I wish/expect.

C. Decreasing anxiety and insecurity in relationships: Finally, I have noticed steadily decreasing anxiety and insecurity in relationships. I can feel this especially with Charlotte and close friends; but also in many other contexts, such as in my mentoring groups, other training events, or any other setting where I have felt insecurity in the past regarding whether people would be happy with me and want to be with me.

This material is still not fully resolved, since emotions still sometimes well up when I talk about these memories.

IV. Final thoughts: Again, I am offering these observations as data points. In my work with this early separation trauma, the basic, usual Immanuel Approach process and techniques helped, but they did not seem able to completely resolve these important issues. As described, it was very helpful to use additional memory access tools and special memory access tools, and to learn additional information about implicit memory, eighteen-month-old developmental phenomena, and attachment trauma.

Looking back at this healing work, I can see ways that I could have used the usual Immanuel Approach process and techniques more effectively. With more discernment and guidance from the Lord, I may have been able to get through without these additional/special tools and this additional understanding. (As always, the more we can follow Jesus the less we need other resources.) But the point I want to make here is that in the real world of Jesus-connections that are sometimes mediocre – such as in the healing journey described here, where trauma-anchored

⁵ It's actually quite amazing that my managing, coping defenses could maintain so much of my adult functions as all of this was happening inside. I'm sure people could tell that something was wrong – I'm sure I looked and felt tired and maybe also discouraged – but I still presented as a competent psychiatrist and could care for all of the logical, medical, medication concerns.

blockages hindered my ability to follow the Lord's guidance more effectively – other tools and information proved to be very helpful.